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*Nurses Tell Reps. Carnahan, Filner That Culture Needs To Change At Cochran To One That Is Focused On Serving Veterans*

(ST. LOUIS, MO) - Nurses who work at the John Cochran VA Medical Center came forward today to talk about ongoing concerns that are affecting patient care at the facility. The nurses, who work in the telemetry and intensive care units at Cochran, have experienced chronic problems with response from management to concerns about absent or broken equipment, staffing levels, and other issues relevant to patient care.

"People don't go into nursing because they want to make money," said Wes Gordon, a veteran and telemetry nurse at Cochran. "They do it because they care about people, they care about their patients. And these veterans deserve the very best care possible."

Some of the problems detailed by the nurses include:

- Equipment, such as oxygen tubing for respiratory assistance, is chronically broken or unavailable;
- Tools that could provide time-critical diagnoses, such as fundoscopes, are unavailable, despite over 3 years of regular requests;
- Lack of disposable equipment in "isolation rooms," which is important in preventing the transmission of infectious diseases from one patient to another;
- Too few nurses and nursing aides are assigned to too many patients, compromising nurses' ability to provide proper care and resulting in patients going days without baths or clean linens.

Gordon presented hundreds of emails he had sent to management requesting their attention to

these and other problems over the past year - many of which had gone unanswered. He noted that even the simplest of requests - applesauce for patients who cannot swallow, and thus need medication ground into soft food - took over 2 years to be addressed. And when he brought in his own supply of applesauce, he was immediately reprimanded.

"This is unacceptable in an organization that is supposed to be patient-focused," said Carnahan, who has called for multiple investigations in the wake of sterilization problems at the Cochran dental clinic that potentially exposed over 1800 veterans to blood-borne illnesses. "I have been pleased with some of the improvements that have been made in the sterilization process, but it would appear that incident was a symptom of a much larger problem. We can't be satisfied with small changes around the edges. We have to get to the bottom of this so that we can make the fundamental changes that clearly are necessary to make sure veterans get the care that they deserve."

Glenda Skinner, another nurse and veteran who spoke at today's meeting, said that she had worked at other VA Medical Centers, and that the contrast in quality was stark.

"I hope this is the end of where we have been and the beginning of better care for these patients," Skinner said.

The nurses discussed the issues in a meeting held today with area veterans and Representatives Russ Carnahan (MO-03) and Bob Filner (CA-51), the incoming ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. After the meeting, Carnahan and Filner traveled to the Cochran Medical Center for a tour, during which they promised to press Cochran officials about some of the concerns expressed in the meeting.

Carnahan said that reports from the two independent bodies investigating problems at Cochran - the Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office - were expected to be made public by mid-Spring. A third, internal VA investigation, was reportedly concluded in November, but has yet to be made public, a problem which Carnahan and Filner pledged to rectify.

Carnahan also indicated that he had talked with incoming House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (FL-01) about holding a follow-up hearing in St. Louis when the results of those reports are made public.

Filner, who was Chairman of the Veterans Committee for the 110th and 111th Congress, urged the media to make sure that Gordon and the other nurses did not suffer retribution for coming forward today.

"As Members of Congress, we can't exercise oversight without information," Filner said. "We need brave people like this to come forward and tell us what is really happening. They shouldn't be punished for trying to make sure those veterans get the care they deserve."

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